

## **. Contemporary paradigms on actor training methodologies: articulated knowledge at The Bridge of Winds' group**

This paper intends to look at some specific notions within new politics of knowledge in relation to the work of the training group The Bridge of Winds, led by Odin Teatret's actress Iben Nagel Rasmussen. We will begin by looking at their methods and knowledge transmission systems, from master to pupils, their group dynamics and the history of its structure. We will then relate this context to Ranciere's approach to Politics of Knowledge in order to re-consider the figure of the master in contemporary theatre.

The Bridge of Winds is an international independent theatre group, incorporated into the Nordisk Teaterlaboratorium in Denmark as one of the 26 activities and programs developed by this complex theatre community, which also includes the Odin Teatret.

The history of the group started in 1989 when Iben Nagel Rasmussen – at that time already an experienced Odin Teatret's actress – started to feel the need to find her own path within the trainings of the group led by Eugenio Barba. She gathered a few students she had met during previous workshops all around the world and began to re-think and reconsider her work.

Under her leadership, they created a group of approximately 20 people that has been since then meeting once a year for a session of 3 to 4 weeks. Every year, they have tried to meet at a different place, so they traveled a big portion of world together, performing and thinking performance with their bodies.

The most visible part of the group's work to the audience is, of course, their performances and barbers, a sort of community artistic exchange developed by Eugenio Barba in the early 90's. Moreover, the group performs a concert titled "Songs of Winds" consisting of traditional and folklore songs from the specific cultures of each member.

For us, however, the most remarkable activity of the group is not the creating and performing of the pieces, but the practice of a specific voice and body training that gave birth to their forms of expression.

We had the chance to witness the group meeting this past January where, for 20 days they trained daily and created the draft of a new theatre piece. Throughout my experience as a performer and a practitioner that comes from Brazil, where one could find a deep connection with the approaches of Grotowski and Barba to training, I have always sensed that the ultimate target of my work was related to achieving a total connection with my body, a fluidity on my movements which allows me to think with my whole, a sense of psychophysical balance which ultimately, leads me towards an extra-ordinary presence. That is the point where I find myself ready to create, to become expressive. Watching The Bridge of Winds trainings felt to me like coming home.

Watching they work, I had to ask myself how did this place I felt like calling home was created. What is the key for establishing this kind of long-term cooperation between such different people? Why does it feel so close to me? And, most importantly, why do members meet for more than 25 years to do always the same work? What is at the core of this training community which makes them desire for the next meeting again and again?

Carlos Simioni, one of the founders of the group and current leader of Brazilian Theatre Group Lume, an actor with decades of experience, told me he can only explain the reasons to keep on training, to keep on doing the Wind dance, as it is the only way he know to exercise his heart. To dance is to talk through one's heart. As subjective as it sounds, any performer would agree with this sentence, any performer would understand that this is a legitimate way to achieve that quality that comes to touch us in a performance.

The structure of the Bridge of Winds group is simple, respected and never contested: it has a clear master – Iben, and many members / pupils, that have been working long enough to assume the position of masters themselves. Although Iben would never call herself a master, it was beautiful to observe the respect every member of the group projects on her. Calling her a master was an organic decision that came from the pupils, from below, as one could say. They meet daily and punctually to start the training without any command being need to be given. For the whole morning they work without being interrupted on a devised structure of exercises they all know by heart. Iben only watches, make a few notes and by the end of it provides small feedbacks regarding their precision, their energy and their own performance within the training. When I asked her what was she looking for in the training she replied: connection.

In the light of the experience of observing the group's meeting, this paper wants to briefly analyze some notions and relations between the working system of the group and the role of the master nowadays, backed up by Ranciere's readings on politics of knowledge.

As a young actress, Iben developed her own training after figuring that she couldn't find the same fluidity as Grotowski's Theatre Laboratory actors, particularly Richard Cieslak, in the corporeal and plastique exercises he shared with Odin actor's in their summer meetings. She recounts how tired she would get from this practice and how hard it was to find this continuous flow that was so clear in the others.

The turning point in her training work happened when she set herself free from the exercises and asked herself what could work for her. What is for her a dramatic action.

She refused her master's exercises after recognizing it was not suitable for her body and so she created her own practice. However, what she did not refuse was this important understanding that training was still essential. That it was not a matter of giving up but reformulating training.

Looking back on Stanislavski's greatest students – Mejerchold or Vakhtangov – we could see it clearly. They were students that, after having accepted the knowledge passed from the master, began to question it. The rest of their life was an answer to the master's teaching, a process of verification. As Mika Juusela, one of Iben's new winds, beautifully resumes it: "I need to grow out of "need" for a master, but I need a master to do that" (Juusela, 2015). Grotowski clearly states the same in his essay "Answer to Stanislavski". Usually, this new, personal poetics established during this verification process often opposes the master's teaching at the same time it harmonizes with it.

Paradoxically, this genuine master/pupil relationship, based on a fruitful refusal, cannot be achieved without a preceding acceptance and long-term engagement with the subject to be questioned.

Now, French philosopher Jacques Ranciere, in his Ignorant Schoolmaster's theory, provides us with Jacotot's confronting hypothesis stating that every intelligence is equal. In short, Jacotot was a French teacher who arrived at the Flemish community to work at the Leuven University. Faced with the fact he could not communicate with the students, he developed a whole different approach to education, based on the principle of a master who teaches what he doesn't know. Without giving any explanations about his mother language and with the single help of a bilingual edition of Telemachus, he managed to bring all the students to a decent level of French in a couple of months.

At this point, he begins to question the need of explaining things to the students. Is it really necessary? He begins to call the traditional method of knowledge transmission from a master (who knows the content) to a student (the one who knows nothing), the stultified education. This method, based on explanation, consists on creating a constant and negative hierarchy between masters and students, where the teaching is fragmented, giving the constant feeling to the student that he still doesn't know the whole of the content, that he always needs the master. In opposition to that, he developed a method to emancipate the students, where one could teach even what he/she does not know. This project is sustained by some principles which are all hypothetical in some level: that all intelligences are equal, that one learns through the will of learning and that everybody can teach, even what they do not know. In this operatory hypothesis of equality, a work of constant verification occurs: because there is a decision, the constant and active verification of this equality works objectively. This is the point which brings me back to my first questionings on how the Bridge's community work. What is the role of Iben in the group then and why is that so important? Because it works upon the constant verification of equality, the will to take this verification to its last consequences, where a master could only be defined as she who will not stop demanding verification, so the student can prove him/herself.

Ranciere makes it clear that what interests him in the whole philosophy on the ignorant schoolmaster does not have as much to do with the pedagogical system as it has with the society model based upon the hierarchy of the ones who know in opposition of the ones who doesn't (Power, 2010, p. 78). Society is perhaps a too large term to this paper, but we can make here a bridge with the notion of theatrical community Iben built with her group. Starting from the presupposition that everyone is equal, The Bridge of Winds managed to create a shared knowledge, a community with no hierarchies, where the notion of a master was gained, given to Iben by the 'students'. By means, it was a common decision of the group to see her like that, which brings a turn to the notion of hierarchy as it is constructed from the bottom. That is to say, even an emancipated student can accept a master. An ignorant one. A master which "does not transmits his/hers knowledge neither is a guide that shows the student the 'good way', but a master who is purely will, who says to the other will in front of him/her to go and find your own path, and therefore, to exercise your own intelligence on the search for this path" (Ranciere, 2003, p. 188).

Iben's legacy for the history of training in theatre lays in her constant insistence of claiming that the training is "first and foremost a way for the performer to claim her artistic independence" (Magnat, 2014, p. 105).

What is important to point out in this context is that Iben's questioning of the Theatre Laboratory actor's training practices led her to an emancipation. She became certain of a way of learning and working which brought her to a great level of autonomy and commitment, "which turns performance into an act of self-determination by establishing one's sovereignty over one's creative work" (Magnat, 2014, p. 105). She is there to give

the tools and support for the actors to create a self-body poetics, which they could be able to repeat and develop alone in their own home contexts.

The search for this self-determination is at the heart of the methodology of the group. Their tools can be resumed in 5 different kinds of exercises. As Mika Juusela, one of the new winds explains, "these energetic exercises may have simple external form but they are rather difficult to master. They allow a performer to explore an intimate, creative and meditative world of physical theatre impulses, stories and actions. They are very precise and structured in a sequence that does not change much, they are done in contact with the others, but at the same time the work is highly individual. It is a training that asks for great amount of alertness, sensitivity and willingness to overcome ones physical comfort" (Juusela, 2015).

(Photos/ videos)

Therefore, the work of the group is sustained by this fascinating idea, that one could find much of the tools needed to awaken the extra-ordinary body in very few exercises. Each of these 5 exercises were chosen and devised in order to reach a specific end. But they are still only 5. And it was intriguing to see the states the performers could reach through the practice. It was fascinating to find together with Iben the connections she was also looking for. Bridge's member Guillermo Angelelli explains : "we are working always in the relationship, between you and the space, you and another person, [...], because what is really happening is always in between these things" (Galli, not released yet).

Josette Feral, notes that all great theatre masters of the past century have tried to devise appropriate exercises to give the actor a formation of both body and spirit" (Feral, 2009, p. 23). This training boom created last century provided the actors/students from all over the world with a wide variety of exercises to choose from, according to one's own personal and aesthetic choices. "However what is at stake in the end is the fact that the choice of what exercise to practice doesn't really matter, when the exercise is taken to its limits." (*idem*).

That is precisely the idea Jacques Ranciere exposes in his understanding of universal teaching, "[...] to learn something and to relate to it all the rest [...]" (Ranciere, 1991, p. 18). In short: "Everything is in everything". By the course of his experience, Jacotot managed to generate an impressive amount of knowledge out of the book *Telemachus*. The book guided the students on discoveries in many branches of knowledge according to their own will.

In the training of *The Bridge of Winds*, the 5 exercise don't find their goal on themselves, but the relation with them is a way of finding the actor's ethos: "Ethos as a scenic behavior, that is, physical and mental technique, and ethos as a work ethic, that is, a mentality modeled by the environment, the human setting where the apprenticeship develops" (Barba, 2005, p. 278).

We could relate thus the 5 exercises of the Bridge to a theatrical tradition that understands training as a work on oneself. This work on oneself, in a constant cycle, should generate new modes of training adapted to the performer's own ethos. Moreover, these exercises Iben developed with the group and which remain the core of their formation are, as she explains, yet a way to "remain in contact with the creative sources of her own work" (Magnat, 2014, p. 110), a way to resist the dominance of a director over the performer. As

soon as one stops training, the hierarchy is established and the stultified relation is set. Training, in short, is the emancipation of the performer.

What I found particularly revealing about the configuration of this group of extraordinarily committed artists is the fact that even though they see on Iben Nagel Rasmussen the leader and master without whom the group would not have survived throughout these productive decades of work, “its intergenerational artistic longevity hinges upon a non-hierarchical model which is inclusive, participatory, and self-regulating” (Magnat, 2014, p. 112). To her credit, Rasmussen’s relationship to the group is neither that of a teacher to her students nor that of a director to her actors, and even less that of an emblematic Odin Teatret actress to her devoted followers, but rather that of an exceptionally experienced and compassionate creative collaborator whose generosity of spirit and commitment to her craft provide an alternative model of artistic and pedagogical emancipation.

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